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ABSTRACT

A study was done of homeless children and their access to education in District of Columbia Public Schools and of implementation of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in that school district. A review of District of Columbia proposals for programing and for funding, interviews with school and city officials, and interviews with homeless children and their families provide the data for the study. The investigation found that in the District of Columbia compliance with the McKinney Act is at best extremely limited. The District of Columbia has failed to comply with several provisions of the Act: (1) there is no system in place for determining school placement for homeless children; and (2) there is not even a designated person to make determinations as required by the McKinney Act. In addition, the most serious problem homeless children face in the District of Columbia is transportation. Of the 21 families interviewed for the study, over 50 percent said that their children regularly miss school because they cannot afford transportation costs. Interviews revealed a direct correlation between missed schooling due to lack of transportation and educational performance. The study offers recommendations, appends the substance of the interviews, and lists five references. (JB)

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NATIONAL LAW CENTER
ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

STUCK AT THE SHELTER

Homeless Children and the D.C. School System

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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* * *

Lorraine Friedman and Justine Stamen are the principal authors of the report. Carol Wayman provided editorial assistance. Maria Foscarinis edited and supervised the research for this report.

Executive Summary

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, a federal law enacted in 1987, requires all states and the District of Columbia to ensure homeless children access to public school. The Act specifies steps local governments must take to implement this mandate. It provides federal funds to local governments that submit "plans" stating how they will carry out these steps.

Nationally, this program is still not being implemented. At the federal level, the Department of Education has been lax in distributing funds, providing information, and monitoring state compliance. At the local level, state compliance is extremely uneven.

In the District of Columbia, compliance is, at best, extremely limited. The District has failed to comply with several provisions of the McKinney Act: there is currently no system in place for determining school placement for homeless children. Indeed, the District's plan does not even include the designation of a person to make such determinations as required by the McKinney Act.

By far the most serious problem homeless children face in the District is transportation. Of the 21 families interviewed by the Center, over half said that their children regularly miss school because they cannot afford transportation costs.

Center interviews revealed a direct correlation between missed schooling due to lack of transportation and educational performance. But, in the word of one homeless father, "education is the only way." Without an education, future prospects for these children are bleak.

BACKGROUND

Homeless families with children are the fastest growing population of homeless Americans. The 1989 U.S. Conference of Mayors Report found that families make up more than one - third of the nation's homeless. One in every four homeless people in America's major cities are children. Many other families are at serious risk of homelessness because they spend over 50% of their income on housing. Problems arise because they lack an economic cushion if their rent escalates or their income falls due to sickness or a missed paycheck.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that almost half of all poor renter households in 1985 (the last year data was available) spent more than 70% of their income on housing. This was a 25% increase from 1978, less than 10 years earlier. Clearly, the dramatic rise in homelessness among families is connected to the severe drop in the number of low-income housing units available to an escalating number of poor families.

Homelessness hurts children in many ways. Living in temporary housing, on the street, in a car, or in a shelter exposes these already vulnerable children to health problems, emotional distress and separation, poor nutrition and, as this report indicates -- barriers to learning and education. State education agency reports submitted to the U.S. Department of Education and cited in their 1990 Report to Congress indicate a series of barriers that keep homeless children from attending school regularly.

Nationally, twenty - eight states report that lack of transportation prevents some homeless children from attending school. This was the most frequently cited reason for non-attendance. Correspondingly, this report finds that transportation costs are the single largest impediment in getting homeless children to school in the District of Columbia. Residency rules and documentation requirements also operate to deny homeless children access to school according to a May 1990 Law Center report entitled "Shut Out: The Denial of Education to Homeless Children."

It's time to help these children. Presently the Bush Administration is failing to comply with a federal program to ensure basic education to homeless children. The 1987 Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act guarantees homeless children access to public school, and just under $5 million in federal funds have been appropriated each year for these purposes.

However, as detailed in the May Law Center report, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), which is supposed to carry out this program, has been lax in doing so. Not only is DOE one year behind in distributing funds, but it has also prohibited the states from actually using funds to educate homeless children. The funds can only be used for administrative purposes.

Today 450,000 children are homeless and, according to recent government data, another two million are "precariously housed" and at imminent risk of homelessness. Homelessness, a crisis in itself, serves to deepen and perpetuate the crisis by preventing children from attending school.

After interviewing families from six D.C. shelters during the months of July and August, the Law Center found that all 21 families interviewed reported transportation difficulties. Parents who do not have money to feed or house their children were spending up to $80 a month to keep the only stable thing in their children's lives -- their school -- available.

But the difficulties affording transportation to school were often too great:

- 14% of the families kept their children home two or more days a week because bus fare was too expensive.
- Another 24% of the families kept their children home "a lot" because they could not afford to pay for their transportation to school.
- Another 24% missed two weeks or more due to transportation problems, of which 10% of the families estimated that their children had to miss at least half of the school year because they could not afford to send them to school.

In addition, children who were able to get to school, faced great problems:

- 14% of the families sent their children to school every day; however, the children walked great distances if the parents did not have money for the bus fare. The walk was eight miles round trip for one fifth grader, whose father escorted him whenever there was no money for bus fare.
- 14% of the children had to ride for an hour or longer to get to their home school. One child must change buses three times to get to school.
- 19% of the families said that even though it would have been better for their children to stay at their original school, they were forced to transfer to a school closer to the shelter because they did not have the money to pay for the bus fare back to their home school.
- 10% of the children had to repeat a grade due to falling behind in their studies due to missed classes because they could not afford to get to school.
- 24% of the families had trouble feeding their children because their after - school activities or early departures to catch buses conflicted with the shelter feeding schedule.

A direct correlation between these students' poor attendance and their declining academic performance is evident. One boy was a straight 'A' student, until he moved to a shelter and started missing school. Now he gets 'C's. One child failed the third grade, while another will have to repeat the ninth grade

for the third time next year. A child who used to attend the Gifted Program at her school now misses almost half of the school days due to lack of affordable transportation. Obviously, the costs are too great to bear.

THE STATE PLAN

The McKinney Act mandates that homeless children be granted access to public schools. It specifies procedures to ensure that this mandate is implemented. In addition, the Act requires each state to submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education explaining how the state will meet the requirements of the Act.

The plan must ensure that local educational agencies either continue the child's education in the school district of origin or enroll the child in the school district in which he is now living -- whichever is in the best interests of the child. The Act states that placement must be made regardless of whether the child is living with his parents or temporarily placed elsewhere.

In addition, the Act requires designation of a local official who will make the necessary determinations required by the Act and procedures for dispute resolution.

Finally, the plan must provide for homeless students to receive services comparable to those offered to other nonhomeless students. And, records must be maintained for each homeless child so they are available in a timely manner when the homeless child enters school.

All of these requirements are essential for the receipt of federal funding. Although the D.C. state plan was approved by the U.S. Department of Education, it was rejected under the Law Center's analysis. There was no mention of a person authorized to make the determination required in the plan as required in Sec. 722(e)(1)(A) of the McKinney Act. Without someone authorized to make determinations (e.g. which school is in the child's best interest), the D. C. plan is incomplete. However, despite this omission, the District received $50,000 in federal funding for the education of homeless children and youth.

The D.C. state plan states that there are roughly 1,400 homeless children of families that are currently living at temporary shelters, about 60% of whom are school age. This number is corroborated by a recent, June 1989, Government Accounting Office (GAO) Report which cites the number of homeless children and youth in D.C. as 1,236.

However, Beverly Wallace, the D.C. Coordinator in charge of educating homeless children and youth, disputes these figures. She says that when Capitol City Inn closed, according to the the Office of Emergency Shelter and Support Services, 75% of those children went into public housing. The other 25% were

transferred to other shelters. The current count according to Ms. Wallace is approximately 419 school age homeless children.

However, Bernice A. Muskelly, the Family - Child Social Worker for the Mental Health Association's Homeless Children's Project, says that these figures are misleading as they only count children in shelters. Children living with relatives or on the street are not included in the current D.C. official figures. She also says that while many families were placed in housing when Capitol City Inn closed, these numbers do not take into account that many families were expelled to the streets or placed in other shelters. Another problem with the counts is that they do not account for any form of recidivism. "It's very frustrating. DHS (Department of Human Services) puts them in places they can't afford. It sets them up for failure." "Then," she says, "we see the same families in and out" of the shelter system."

The plan identifies five approaches to solving the problems encountered in educating homeless children. According to Beverly Wallace, the first objective of establishing and maintaining a student database has been accomplished. She says that they now have a strong tracking system in place in D.C..

The second objective involved facilitating enrollment by assisting in registration of students and ensuring attendance. Ms. Wallace said that they have made pamphlets for homeless families explaining how to enroll their children in school. However, these aids will not be ready for the first day of school. Rather, their target date to be back from the printers is mid-September, so that they will be able to assist homeless parents enroll their children two months after school has begun.

The third objective listed in the D.C. state plan is to provide intake to determine the needs of students identified as homeless. The plan identifies ways to determine these needs, yet when we pointed out that many homeless children were unable to get to school due to lack of transportation, many people involved in the D.C. school system, including Ms. Wallace, seemed to know nothing about the problem.

The fourth objective involved providing services needed by homeless students. Ms. Wallace says that she "doesn't like to see kids discriminated against because of the obstacles in their lives." With this in mind, she has back-to-school packets for homeless children which will be delivered to the shelters starting the first day of school. These packets include: a notebook, a book bag, crayons, writing paper, scissors, pens, pencils, glue and a dictionary. However, another service targeted was to have notices up in the shelters about how to get discounted tokens. As of yet, there are no notices. Also, books instructing educators on how to assist the special needs of homeless children will not be ready until mid-September.

Finally, the fifth objective is to evaluate and monitor the project to determine whether or not the goals have been accomplished. One of the service provision objectives reads "coordinate and plan appropriate transportation services where needed." Clearly, the District has not vigorously pursued this objective because it has yet to be implemented.

The budget submitted along with the District's plan is also somewhat of an enigma. The budget requests $3,000 for travel. In a large state, perhaps that request would seem reasonable; however, in an area as small as D.C., it is questionable at best. No salaries were requested in the budget, nor was money requested for equipment. But $37,000 was allocated for supplies.

THE PROBLEM

According to Sec. 722(e)(3) of the McKinney Act:

> The local educational agency of each homeless child or youth shall either --
>
> (A) continue the child's or youth's education in the school district of origin for the remainder of the school year; or
>
> (B) enroll the child or youth in the school district where the child or youth is actually living; whichever is in the child's best interest or the youth's best interest.

In other words, federal law requires states to allow homeless children to continue in the school they attended before becoming homeless, or to transfer to a new school in the district in which they are currently living. Moreover, the law requires that the school system set up a process for making this determination. Under the law, the "best interest" of the child must govern this determination.

But, in the District of Columbia, it appears that no such determinations are being made. Nor is any consideration being given to the children's interest, much less their "best" interests. Instead, homeless children are being placed in shelters with no consideration of their educational needs.

In particular, the lack of any system of transportation assistance operates to nullify the federally-guaranteed right of homeless children to have the choice of school determined based on their best interests. It may well be in a child's best interest to continue to attend his original school, and federal law protects his right to do so. But without transportation to that school, the right is meaningless.

The purpose of Title VIIB is to provide "access to free, appropriate public education" (emphasis added). Homeless children do not have the means to get to school; they do not have the money to pay to get there. If these children are unable to get to school on their own and the system does not help them, surely they are being denied access.

INSIDE THE SYSTEM

Currently, the only children in D.C. who are provided with transportation are special needs children. If a child is determined to be "handicapped" or in need of special education, a school bus will be sent to his or her place of residence. Otherwise, no buses are provided -- homeless or not.

In a recent interview, Beverly Wallace told the National Law Center that school buses are not provided because there are "schools on practically every corner." The problem with Ms. Wallace's "every corner" view of the situation is that it does not take into account the fact that many homeless children do not attend the school closest to their shelter. Rather, they return to their "home school," the school they were attending before they became homeless.

When pressed about problems that homeless children face in getting to school, Ms. Wallace said she was unaware of any. She explained that homeless children can get discounted tokens to help alleviate any financial burden. However, she did seem to recognize there is a problem because she presented the D.C. Board of Education's Transportation Department with a proposal for free tokens for homeless children. After months, she has yet to receive a reply.

An Assistant Transportation Officer of the D.C. Public School Support Services echoed Ms. Wallace's views that no problems exist with homeless children getting to school. He said the reason D.C. does not supply transportation to school is that there is "ample transportation with the metro system and buses." He said that the school buses are already "swamped" as there are about 2,5000 special education children with only 350 buses. He said that often one bus has to go to three different schools and that more money is needed to keep the current program going, let alone expand it.

Frank Trinity of Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless has quite a different view, as do most advocates and service providers in D.C.. Mr. Trinity focused not only on the problem of transportation but also on "how inequitable the system is... certain families get tokens; others don't." For example, families staying at the Pitts Hotel, a D.C. family shelter, could get tokens there, but families going there for meals (when they served them there) were unable to receive them. This method of distribution demonstrates how arbitrary the system is.

Two attorneys who did pro bono work for the Legal Clinic recently looked into the issue of transportation as a barrier to education. Stan Balis, one of the attorneys, noted that having to pay for transportation to school affects other low income groups as well as homeless children. He said that only a few shelters give out tokens and that homeless people "are basically at the mercy of the system." Mr. Balis also noted the lack of options for these children: they either go to a new school by their shelter and adapt to a new environment with new people and new rules, or they can go to their "home school" and miss breakfast because they need to leave before it is served at their shelter. He concluded that what is happening now with giving out tokens at a few shelters is "like putting band-aids on gangrene. We need to help these kids now, at age 6, not at 26 [when they have children themselves]. The only way to assist and really help them is when they are young, school-aged."

David Gotlieb, the other attorney working with the Washington Legal Clinic, says that the main problem is the structural impediments within the system. He said that "D.C. government is doing nothing at all" to help these children. He noted the same problems that Mr. Balis did regarding difficulties getting from shelters to schools. As far as tokens are concerned, he said that it was a good idea, but that they are much more difficult to get than they should be. The child has to get a slip from his school stating he is homeless. Then the child must take the paper to a location that sells the discounted tokens. Few shelters sell the tokens and parents often have to travel across the city to get them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the McKinney Act ensures that homeless children and youth be given access to a free, public education, there is evidence that this mandate is not being carried out in the District. Homeless children are unable to get to school due to lack of resources, mainly money. If they are unable to get to school, they are unable to receive the education to which they are entitled and so desperately need.

The D.C. school system provides transportation to special needs children. Homeless children need special assistance, too. Otherwise, these children are being denied the education that the McKinney Act ensures. With this in mind, the National Law Center recommends the following:

- Someone should be making the determinations of best interest and other issues for homelesss children.
- The D.C. School Board should get bus tokens to give to school counselors for use by homeless children instead of the current system where the children can not actually get the tokens at school.
- Free monthly passes should be made available.
- School buses should be routed to go by the family shelters in D.C. to ensure that these children are able to get to school.
- Services meant to benefit the homeless should be provided in a timely fashion (e.g. the pamphlets Ms. Wallace spoke of are going to be ready two months after the school year started).

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THE KERNS FAMILY

When their house burned down, Sheena Kerns and her children were placed at the Budget Motel, a Washington, D.C. shelter for homeless families. Transportation was a difficulty for the family. Ms. Kerns was spending twenty dollars a month on transportation to school for her nine year-old daughter, Koryon.

Ms. Kerns did not want Koryon to leave the school in their old neighborhood. "I don't want my child around people she does not know. It slows her learning down. Her old school was better for her [than changing to a new school near the shelter]. She was in the Gifted & Talented Program at her school. The other school seemed slow and didn't have the program. I wanted the school that offered her the most."

Three weeks before school was out, Ms. Kerns had to pull Koryon out of school when the burden of bus fare became too much for her too handle. Rather than providing transportation for the child, the school let her out. They told Ms. Kerns that Koryon could leave because she "was prepared for the next year."

Ms. Kerns simply stated, "I couldn't afford it... The government gives me assistance with transportation to the job training office, why can't they take my kids to school?"

THE JOHNSON FAMILY

Since April 1990, Shienelle Johnson has lived at the Budget Motel with her five children, ages ten, seven, four, three, and one month. Her ten year-old daughter Tineisha Jones and her seven year-old son Nathan Johnson stay at the shelter about two days a week, instead of attending school because their mother can't afford bus fare every day. While Ms. Johnson is pleased that her children attend their old school, she finds the eighty dollars each month transportation cost to be a considerable burden.

"It takes the children two buses and one hour to get to school, but that's OK -- the bus is a learning experience. I like them in a familiar school because they learn better there. At the shelter, it's hectic enough. We live in one room, with two beds and a couch. We have one bathroom, and everyone must take turns. That gets hard when they are all sick from the shelter food. I don't want a new school on top of all this."

THE RILEY FAMILY

Shirley Riley lives at the Braxton Hotel, a homeless shelter in Washington D.C. with her two children, ages two and eleven. She wants her son to attend his old school: "I don't want him to have to adjust all over again in a new school -- he's happy at his school. Living in a shelter is living hell, with feeding schedules and other people telling you what to do with your children."

When asked if moving to the shelter had an effect on her son's school work, she answered, "His report cards could answer that. Antwaun [Smith] was a straight `A' student until we moved here. He gets `C's now -- because I have to keep him home from school. If it wasn't for his absence nine days a month [half the school month] -- he'd be a straight `A' student again."

Antwaun Smith, eleven years-old, describes going to school from the shelter: "I wake up at 6:00, and it takes at least fourty-five minutes to get to school. At my old house, I could walk up the street. Now I stay home from school a lot. On those days, I might miss a critical skill -- like exponents in math. The only way to catch up is by spending your lunch hour [when you make it back to school] inside learning. They don't make you make-up the work so there's always the dilemma `Do I want to catch-up or go outside?' If you get too behind, you need to stay back a grade or go to summer school. Summer school is my worst enemy. In the summer, I like to have fun -- chill out!"

THE LEFTWICH FAMILY

The Leftwiches live at the Budget Inn shelter with their three children: Tamara & Shrille Tolver, ages ten and twelve, and Dennis Leftwich, Jr., age six. Joyce works for the D.C. public school system, in the cafeteria department. Dennis also works in the D.C. school nutrition department. Tamara is an avid reader and double dutch jump-roper with the school team. Shrille has a track trophy and is on the school track team. She also has a certificate for excellence in math. Dennis,Jr. was on the honor roll this year. Their father talked about how hard it is to do homework in a shelter:

"They see people up at three in the morning talking about drugs. What can I do about this? There is no where to go -- we are closed in the shelter. At our old home, I'd send them into the bedroom to do their work every night. The only noise would be a bird. If people in the halls of our apartment made noise, I'd tell them to be quiet. What can you do in a shelter? It is not my property. Where can you send them in the shelter to do their work? It takes them double time to do it here. The bottom line is drugs, and I'm sick of explaining drugs to them. But, that's what keeps people up all night, blasting the music.

"My wife takes them on the bus to their old school. This takes two hours each way and forty dollars a month. We never keep them home, but it is a lot of money. The only time I keep them home is if it is raining hard. Then, I don't want them tromping across the city for two hours, getting wet."

Transportation is not the only problem the Leftwiches face, living in a shelter: "It's hard for us to feed them because they have after school activities until five like track practice three days and double dutch two days...so they miss the 5:00 meal. No meals can be given to take home to people unless they have a medical excuse -- this is wrong. If we didn't have money in our pocket on a certain night, then they wouldn't eat."

THE DELOATCH FAMILY

Rosa DeLoatch moved to the shelter in the middle of the 1990 school year, with her son Jonathan, age eight. She wanted to keep him at his old school, but could not.

"He had adjusted and was doing well at the old school. I wanted him to stay there. I couldn't afford bus fare every day for Jonathan to get to school from the Braxton [shelter]. It was fifty cents a day. Changing schools was not good for him; it took him the rest of the year to get used to everyone. I went three places looking for bus fare to keep him at his old school. I asked for help at social services and talked to two counselors at the shelter to see if they could help me -- but no one could."

THE TATE FAMILY

Felicia Tate is twelve years-old and in the sixth grade. She stays home two or three days a week, when her mother cannot give her bus fare: "Kids ask why I wasn't at school -- I say I was sick and then they say `you have no [bus] tokens.'"

THE IVY FAMILY

Brenda Ivy and her husband have lived at the Pitts Hotel, with their four children ages sixteen, fifteen, ten and nine since March 1990. They were evicted from their apartment when they both lost their jobs and could not pay the rent. The Ivys could not afford to give them transportation money on several days. Ms. Ivy says, "Usually two times a week, I had to keep them home. One time I had to keep them home for a week."

Her oldest son, Albert Sligh, is sixteen. He will be in the ninth grade for the third time this year. He failed again this year and was making it up in summer school until they kicked him out because he missed three days. Ms. Ivy explains: "Again, he missed because we did not have money for bus fare."

The family stayed at River Terrace School because they had lived in the area for fourteen years and the teachers were helpful.

Ten year-old Pamela says she is mad when she misses school and has to stay at the shelter and watch television all day. "I miss learning...but I have no (bus) tokens to get to school."

THE GRIM FAMILY

The Grim Family, Thomas and Chrisinda and their children, Lapria Gross, age eight, Thomas Grim, Jr., age seven, Christina Grim, age five, and Andre Gross, age four, have lived at the Pitts Hotel since May 1990. Mr. Grim worked in the produce department at Safeway market for the past twelve years. He no longer works there and is suffering from Multiple Sclerosis.

When the family moved to the shelter, Mr. Grim wanted to keep his children at their old school, Brookland Elementary because he thought "it would be good for them mentally and because it was an excellent school." Transportation costs made this impossible.

Her parents say that their daughter Christina suffered because she had to leave her best friend. She has not seen her again. Her report card still says, "Christina is a model student."

The Grim children cannot play on the playground at the shelter because it is infested with ringworms. All six family members sleep in two beds that are pushed together.

THE WILLIAMS FAMILY

Regina Williams and her two children Corey Williams, eight years-old, and Tyree Williams, four years-old, have lived at the Braxton Shelter since June. Before that they lived at Hospitality House Shelter. Her children went to Ruth K. Webb Elementary School. " They had gone there for two years. Just when they got used to that school, I had to switch them to J.O. Wilson School because I did not have the money to get them to the other school."

Because he missed so many school days and because he had to adjust to a new school, Corey fell behind in his studies and must repeat the third grade. Often, the children went to the shelter tutor for one hour, twice a week, instead of going to school: "The whole situation disrupted my son's education."

THE MOON FAMILY

Since April 1990, Barbara Moon has lived at the Pitts Hotel with her three children George White, age fifteen, Samuel Hinton, age eleven, and Jeri Hinton, age nine. Her children went to their old school (Draper School) for the first two months while they lived at the shelter. Then, they switched to a closer school for the final month of school. Ms. Moon kept her children home two days a week because she could not afford the bus fare. "My kids got behind when they stayed home. They wanted to be at school. I wanted to send them, but I had no money."

THE GRIFFIN FAMILY

Helen Griffin is a twenty-seven year-old mother of Damien, nine years-old, and Eddie, three years-old. The family lives at the Pitts Hotel, a shelter in Washington D.C.. The children attend Bruce Monroe Elementary School on Georgia Avenue. Damien rides the bus to school. Eddie will start at this school in the fall. Ms. Griffin feels this is the best school for her children because it is familiar to them. Damien has been at Bruce Monroe for four years. She says, "They might be confused by a new school."

She can only afford bus fare three days a week; Damien walks thirty minutes on the other two days because he does not like to miss school.

It is also harder for Damien to do his homework at the shelter. He feels cooped up and wants to go out to play, rather than work.

THE CARTER FAMILY

Gigi Carter, a thirty-five year-old mother, has lived at the Pitts Hotel since February 1990 with her three children Marvin, age six, Janee, age two, and Melvin,one year-old. She takes Marvin on the bus to Garrison School: "I did not want Marvin to go to a new school when we moved to the shelter. Everyone in my family went to Garrison. They know us. I feel a sense of community there."

When Ms. Garrison runs out of money, Marvin walks twenty-five minutes to school. She feels it is unfair that the government will not provide her son with transportation to his school: "It is mandatory that a child goes to school. It is also mandatory that children who live in shelters go to school. So if I run out of money, they should help me get my son to school -- to further his education."

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THE KING FAMILY

Bertina King, mother of Andre King, a fifth grade special education student, sees a strong need for transportation to school for her son. Because he is limited, Andre is not allowed to ride the bus by himself as his mother is worried about the conditions in the city and leaving her son alone.

The Kings became homeless April 20, 1990 due to a fire in their apartment. The family lost everything of value in the fire. They were assigned to the city's shelter at the Braxton Hotel.

As Andre is in special education classes, the DC school district policy mandates that a school bus pick him up. However, it took almost a full month for the bus to start coming to the Braxton to get him. During that month, Andre was unable to go to school because his mother did not have enough money for the two of them to get to school.

That month was very hard on Andre, who loves school. After the school bus started coming to the Braxton, Andre went every day. However, he missed valuable time the month that he was unable to get to school due to lack of transportation.

THE DOBY FAMILY

Sandra Doby and Tommasine, her first grade daughter, live together in the Braxton Hotel, a shelter for families. Tommasine attends Walker Jones, an elementary school about 25 - 30 minutes by bus from their shelter. This is the school Tommasine attended before her family became homeless. Ms. Doby thought it would be too disruptive to make her daughter switch schools considering all the other transitions she was trying to adapt to shelter life for the first time.

There is no school bus that comes to pick up Tommasine, so Ms. Doby escorts her six year-old daughter to school every day as she is too young to ride public transportation alone. Ms. Doby buys a flash pass for the bus. She says that, with the pass, some drivers will let her take her daughter on the bus for free; others make her pay the additional eighty-five cents, which she often can not do.

Ms. Doby says that when she has to pay for both of them, her daughter can only go to school as long as the money lasts: "It's plain and simple ... if I don't have the money, she can't get to school." Ms. Doby says that seems unfair to her.

THE WILLIAMS FAMILY

Wanda Williams moved into TLC Shelter with her daughter Aletha on May 2, 1990. It was their third move this year and Ms. Williams was concerned about the effect of all the changes on her daughter's performance in school.

Aletha is a very bright second grader who, despite the lack of continuity in her life and repeated transitions this past year, "made all 'A's and the rest 'B's." Ms. Williams described Aletha's summer study schedule, two hours a day of reading and working problems in workbooks Monday - Thursday and one hour on Friday. Clearly, education is of premium importance to this family.

Nevertheless, Aletha could not go to school the first two weeks after she moved into the shelter. The first week, the family was getting oriented to their new surroundings and Ms. Williams did not have the money for the two of them to get to and from school. She did not want her seven year-old daughter riding the public bus alone until Aletha knew the bus route and felt comfortable with it. Aletha says that she was very unhappy those weeks because she knew she was missing out on something important at school.

One of the reasons Aletha was out of school so long is that she had to get a slip from her school permitting her to get half price tokens. Once she had the paper, Ms. Williams had to go to southeast to the Car Barn to trade in the school slip for tokens. Ms. Williams was displeased that she couldn't get the tokens at the shelter and feels it added to the delay.

Another problem since their move to the shelter is that Aletha often must miss breakfast. In order to get from her new address in northwest to Webb Elementary School in northest she must leave an hour earlier than she used to leave. Ms. Williams did not want to make her daughter switch schools with only one month left in the school year, so Aletha finished second grade at Webb. When the family lived at the Budget Inn, Aletha could eat a free breakfast downstairs or at school. Now, she usually has to leave too early for the free breakfast at the shelter and is too late for the free breakfast at school.

Added to the transportation and breakfast problems, Ms. Williams is also worried about her daughter riding home alone after school as Aletha often stays for after-school activities. Unfortunately, Ms. Williams says that there is nothing that she can do about it because she doesn't have the money to go pick Aletha upeach day.

THE FORREST FAMILY

Sandra Forrest has been living with her three children at the Pitts Motel for two and a half months. The Forrest children continue to attend the school they went to before they became homeless. However, since they no longer live in that neighborhood, they have a long commute. Ms. Forrest says that it takes approximately an hour to get to school every day.

Since the ride is so long, they often miss breakfast. Her oldest daughter, Deneka, a seventh grader, is so hungry sometimes she "can't think straight."

Ms. Forrest also said that the eighty-five cent bus fare is a hardship as it costs $5.10 per day for her three children. She estimates that her children have to stay home one or two weeks every month because she doesn't have enough money for the bus.

One of her children, Darryl, is a fourth grader in special education. Because of this, the D.C. school system used to send a bus to pick him up. But when the family became homeless, Ms. Forrest did not report the move to his school because she was afraid that they would not let her son continue at his original school. Thus the school did not notify transportation that Darryl needed the bus to come pick him up at the shelter now. Ms. Forrest said that a transition to a new school would be too much for him, so she paid Darryl's fare to send him back to his "home school" rather than take the chance by reporting their move.

THE WILSON FAMILY

Teresa Wilson, the mother of Jonathan, says that since they have been at the shelter Johnathan has either had to miss breakfast or be late for school each day.

Before he became homeless, Jonathan could walk to school every day. However, since his family was assigned to the Braxton Hotel, a family shelter across town from his school, Jonathan has had a more difficult time getting to school. He must now change the bus three different times in order to get from 14th and Rhode Island, N.W. to his school at 44th and Brooks, N.E..

About half the time, Ms. Wilson says there is not enough money for his bus fare, so he can't go to school. Ms. Wilson describes the situation: "He just sits inside, mad at everything... really mad he can't go to school." She concludes that it doesn't seem fair that there is no way for her son to get to school when she runs out of money.

THE MITCHELL FAMILY

Gregory Mitchell, a twenty-five year-old single parent, is the father of a ten year-old boy, Stanley. Mr. Mitchell welcomed the opportunity to discuss the importance of an education in his son's life.

He feels so strongly that "education is the only way" that he walks his son four miles to school whenever he does not have enough money for the bus fare. He explains that Stanley never misses school even if they have to walk the eight mile round trip together. His school used to be close to home before he became homeless and was assigned to a shelter in northwest.

Stanley is involved in many extracurricular activities and frequently stays after school. His father will walk the four miles to get his son and then walk home with him again. They would often have to miss the evening meal because they would arrive back at the shelter too late. When I asked Stanley if he was tired after walking to school, having a full day of classes and then swim practice after school which often lasts until 6:00 and then walking home, he said "yea - and I carry my trumpet."

Mr. Mitchell says: "I wish I had the money to let him take the bus every day. I wish there a bus to pick him up. But until something changes, we will walk because he must get an education... it is the only answer."

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THE LEE FAMILY

Rose Lee lives with her two sons, Patrick and Nathan Ford, at the Temporary Shelter at 14th and Park Road, N.W.. Her children both attend Webb Elementary School in northeast. Ms. Lee wanted to keep her children in the school they attended before they became homeless, where they know all the teachers, where their friends are and where they feel comfortable. To Ms. Lee these factors outweighed the long bus rides twice a day. She rides with her children to and from school every day as they are too young to go alone: Patrick is seven and Nathan is five.

She says that the only way she has been able to send them to school as often as she has is that the bus drivers let the children go free on her fare because they are both so little and look very young.

Ms. Lee does not keep her children home unless it is a necessity, that is, unless she does not have money for the bus fare. She said she would rather walk them to school than have them stay home, but that it's a long way; too far to walk.

THE YOUNG FAMILY

Claretta Young has lived with her first grade son Kevin in the city's shelter at the Braxton Hotel since March. During the months of March and April, Ms. Young went with her son by bus to Fletcher Johnson Elementary School. This is the school Kevin attended before his family became homeless. She only had to keep her son home from school due to lack of money on a few occasions.

However, in May, she had to take a leave of absence from her job because she could not afford a babysitter for her new baby and had heard bad things about the city day care centers. Because there was no money coming in, Kevin missed the entire last month of school.

Ms. Young told me that if there was a bus that came to the shelters or if she was provided with tokens, her son would be at school everyday. She said, "I want him to get an education. I would send him every day if I could."

THE KNIGHT FAMILY

Mary Knight and her son, Melvin Joe, Jr. lived with two different relatives before finally moving for the third time this year to the Braxton Hotel, a family shelter in northwest Washington, D.C.. Before moving there on August 7, 1990, Mary and Melvin had lived with both her mother and her aunt.

First, Mary and her son lived with her mother and stepfather. As his grandmother's home was a few blocks away from school, Melvin would walk to school every morning. But, when Mary's mother died in April, Ms. Knight and Melvin had to move and went to live with Mary's aunt.

Her aunt lives in northeast, a twenty-five minute bus ride to Garfield Elementary School where Melvin had been attending school. He had just a few months to complete the sixth grade, so Mary decided not to disrupt his education by making him switch schools.

Because he could no longer walk to school, Melvin had to miss school if Mary did not have the money for the bus fare. Because their lack of money caused him to miss so much school, Melvin's grades declined. The '89 - '90 school year was the first year that he did not make the honor roll at his school. It was also the first time that Melvin did not get awarded with perfect attendance.

Mary estimated that Melvin had to miss approximately two weeks out of the last two months because she could not afford to send him to school. Mary said that it was very frustrating to watch her son try to catch up. He always had the work for the days missed plus the current day's homework. He was overloaded and confused because there was no one to help him with his missed assignments, whereas he usually enjoyed school and excelled.

Mary did not want to make Melvin switch schools with only two months left. However, because she often did not have bus money, Melvin had to stay home. This was hard on both of them because Melvin loves school.